

Sent to Carol Ellsberg - Nov 1956
by Dan Ellsberg from Sixth Fleet,
Marine Amphibious Force, 3d Bn. 2nd Marines (3/2)
on evacuation from Alexandria, SUEZ CRISIS

10 November 1956

"Christmas Day in Suda Bay...New Year's Eve in Tel Aviv!" is the cry of the pessimistic liberty hounds. Worst of all: the Marine Corps Birthday on board ship, liquorless, standing off Crete.

"Happy birthday, Sgt. Dailey!" I said when I came into the operations office a few minutes ago. "Happy birthday, Cpl. Young!"

"Sir, have you seen that _____ cake they have down in the mess hall?" asked S/Sgt Dailey.

"Yes. Great," I said. It was a three layer cake, covered with Marine insignia, dates, happy birthday, names of battles.

"Did you see what they have written on that? 'Alexandria Evacuees'! 'Guadalcanal, Seoul, Irawa, Alexandria Evacuees'! _____!"

"Now, don't run that down, Sgt. Dailey. It's my only battle."

"Sir, that _____ won't even show up in your SRB."

"That's all right. It's going to show up in the combat star on my National Defense Service Ribbon. I bought one this morning."

Sunday, 28 Oct:

A drowned flyer was spotted by a lookout in the early morning. The ships deployed all day in search formation, sweeping the area. The day's exercise ashore in Crete, involving the Tactical Air Control Party, was cancelled. All day the APA's, the LSD and the APD wheeled and turned, while an echelon of small boats combed the sea and picked up bits of wreckage and a second ~~figure~~ body. The UDT sharkboat, the LCPR with shark's teeth and eyes painted on the ramp, was in the lead, filled with frogmen.

In the wardroom, talk shifted from the dead airmen to the two sailors missing off the Cambria. They were believed to have slipped off the ship in the night and swum to one of the Greek islands as we passed; we had been within three miles of some. They had mentioned this plan when they were on liberty in Izmir; a muster on the Cambria that morning had revealed them missing. We probably wouldn't search.

Typical of morale on the Cambria. In Salonica and Golfe Juan they had had the most shore patrol reports. ComSixthFleet had restricted the whole ship in Izmir as a result of incidents in Salonica; one staff sergeant had beat up a cab driver and stolen his cab; a sailor, having started a disturbance, beat up all the ~~the~~ Greek police that were trying to keep him out of trouble, and was followed to the police station by a mob of Greeks that wanted to lynch him. Our goodwill tour was leaving a trail of weakened diplomatic relations across the Mediterranean.

Several callow lieutenants on the Cambria had come to battalion commander's mast on board the Chilton to complain against the restriction of the whole ship (including them) in Izmir. That failing, they were said to have addressed a letter to SecNav, through channels, protesting the mass punishment. Something really wrong over there (perhaps not surprising; the two company commanders were Willis and Cargill). Next, lieutenants would be swimming ashore.

Monday, 29 Oct:

Anchored off Crete. CPX ashore, scheduled to involve all the staff sections, cancelled because the Pocono, with the admiral aboard, was still searching for survivors. I worked all day in the op office on notes for the talk on Israel I had planned for months. It led up to a summary of the temptations confronting Israel to incite an attack by Jordan, as an excuse to crush the League forces. The Israel raids, since I first planned the talk, had been getting bigger and bigger. I wanted to be sure to deliver it in Officers' School before we were committed. The President, two days before, had advised Americans in the Middle East to leave, if practical.

I happened to drop into Combat Information Center and look over the teletype tape for the last few days. I had never looked at the tape before, the Navy didn't like us in their offices, especially CIC. We hadn't been getting much news just the headlines in the ship's newspaper. Something was going on in Hungary, and Poland. The Jordan elections were imminent, Iraq troops might enter Jordan, a joint Arab military command was about to be implemented. In response, Israel seemed to be mobilizing. The American election was winding up.

I got my gear together for the conditioning march on Crete the next day. In the late afternoon, the loudspeaker announced: "Set the special sea and anchor detail." Coleman and I went up to the quarterdeck to find out where the ship was moving. Jacobson, on the commodore's staff, was up there. "All right, you jarheads better clean your weapons," he said. "We're going to take evacuees out of Haifa." He was smiling jovially.

"Baloney," said Coleman. "We're going out on maneuvers. We'll be back here tomorrow morning."

"I try to give you the right scoop, you won't believe me....all right, I'll tell you, we're going back to Norfolk." The Navy men had been betting for a month we would be back home before Christmas; a warrant officer on the Snelling was offering 5 to 1.

"Don't get your hopes up, Ellsberg, we'll be here tomorrow for the hike," Coleman said. He had done all the arranging for the hike, and he couldn't believe they wouldn't have it. Three out of four exercises we planned were cancelled at the last minute, but he always refused to expect it. I bet him a buck we would be on our way the next day to Israel or Egypt. While we were at it, I bet him another buck that Israel would attack or be attacked within 30 days. It was 1630.

But the ship didn't move right away. That night at dinner I sat across from Captain Nelson. "Are your men combat ready?" I asked him. "Mr. Ellsberg, you know that Golf Company is always combat ready," he said. Capt. Nelson has been in the Crotch a long time, but he missed action in the Pacific and was always with supporting units in Korea, so he is very eager for action. (He prefaces his remarks in a political discussion, in recent days with: "Of course, any way is better than no war"). He's a good company commander; but as a matter of fact, Golf Company, almost as much as the rest of the battalion, is very far from combat ready. An hour before I had asked Whitaker, who has 3d Platoon, whether any of the platoons ever carried out the daily hour of exercise prescribed in the training schedule I had issued. He said never, as far as he knew. It was too hard to find space. That didn't carry very far, because I had been wearing myself out daily (it took about 15 minutes) in a few square feet in the Troop Officers' Quarters. The troops had had no exercise since they were last on Crete, a month before.

The battalion as a whole was possibly the least prepared unit in the Marine Corps. Just before we left, it had been filled up with privates just out of boot camp and Infantry Training Regiment: probably 60% of its strength. All five company commanders were brand new to their companies and totally without infantry experience. The battalion commander was a lawyer, definitely intelligent, who has never to this day shown the slightest interest in learning his job ~~and~~ or in running the battalion.

The whole battalion was liberty-oriented, led in this by the staff, which proved (along with the company commanders) to be the biggest liberty-hounds. The companies got good training in the few days on Crete earlier, but it was not a coincidence that no battalion-size problems were scheduled (so that there was no staff-work) and that the CP was "administrative" rather than tactical, so that the CO and XO could sit in camp chairs around a tall fire at night and spend the days roaming the island ~~the~~ in the staff car. A hike at the end of the training, grandiosely set by the Colonel at 25 miles, was called off at the last minute: according to the Adjutant, because the CO (who had not participated in the 7 mile hike back to the ship the day before) and the XO (who had) did not feel up to it.

We rarely saw the Colonel, except when he appeared in the wardroom to look around vaguely at the lieutenants and ask, "Y'all got any books?" Glimpsed through the curtains to his room, he usually appeared to be reading magazines. ~~Major~~ The XO was doing little more except to call the junior officers together to chew them out for neglecting their troops and emphasizing liberty too much. These did not sit well, since he was the only officer who had overstayed liberty (several times) in Athens, once staying out all night (an authoritative rumor had it that the Sergeant-Major had put him to bed in a hotel in Piraeus). ~~They~~

The lectures finally stopped when the XO himself got restricted to the ship for the remainder of the cruise, by the General, for striking a captain in an argument while on liberty in Golfe-Juan. The Adjutant was restricted for two months, by the CO, for disappearing in Golfe-Juan for two days; the Air Liaison Officer likewise got two months for his one day UA in Golfe-Juan. Apparently Golfe-Juan offered many temptations to the battalion while I was safely away in Paris.

The S-3 was undoubtedly conscientious and efficient, in planning our operations, but he showed no great interest in stimulating ~~our~~ training of the battalion aboard ship. Each week we required a report from each ship of total hours of training completed that week. I entered the reported figure on a chart: 12 hours, 30 hours, 20 hours. As a matter of fact, almost no training was going on, aboard the Chilton; probably the figures for the other ships were equally fictitious.

Meanwhile, perhaps ~~bo~~incidentally, the W- S-3 was missing out on a lot even of the planning. Before and during the last operation, he was ashore on plush Shore Patrol duty. During the next, he planned to be on leave. Of course, he had Coleman and me as assistants, but a surprising amount of discretion was being allowed us (he was protected, of course, by the fact that few of the planned operations actually came off).

I wasn't fighting it any more. I did everything that was required of me, which was more than most of the other officers had to do, but which wasn't very much. I had resigned myself that this was a liberty cruise, which wasn't what I had come for; and what was worse, the liberty itself was more frustrating than I had expected, starting every day about 1700, so that there was no light for pictures and nothing open except the bars. I had ulcer symptoms.

After dinner I read some of T.E. Lawrence's letters. Then I decided to get the talk finished. The loudspeaker announced that the General had arrived on board: first time. Then the General and the Colonel and Commodore left, and later the Colonel and Commodore came back. The ship got underway, we didn't know where it was heading. The consensus was that it would perform night maneuvers near Crete. About 2100 I finished up the notes for the lecture. A few minutes later a sailor burst in to the room from Radio Central next door and said, "Israel has just attacked Egypt. It just came over the tape." I went into the other room and looked at the tape. It was a three-sentence announcement by Israel.

Shall I record my feelings? I was overjoyed. I thought: this is what I came for; now things are going to change around here. How the hell am I going to get out of the S-3 office? It was regrettable, very, that we were probably going to fight Israel, but as Captain Nelson would say, it was a war. I went down to the wardroom and told the news, in a straightforward way, but with a big, irrepressible grin on my face. This made a bad impression.

As I was down there, the Plan of the Day was distributed for the next day. It stated that we were going into the southeastern Med, "because of tension in the Middle East." So we were missing Barcelona, our next liberty port, for the second time (it had been scheduled to be our first liberty port; but because of Suez we had sailed right past it into the Eastern Med). (Barcelona had been anticipated very eagerly, after stops in Salonica and Izmir. It was supposed to be the best liberty port in the Med. At least, 2/8 had gotten the highest rate of venereal infection there; they had run out of penicillin). Coleman paid me a buck. I couldn't stop grinning, so I left the wardroom, where the appropriate attitude had not yet been evolved in general, and went back to Radio Central. I stayed up late following the tape.

30 Oct:

No one knew where we were heading. It might be Suez. More likely, it would be an Egyptian or Israeli port, to take off American evacuees; we might hit all in turn. Probably, our landing (to protect the evacuation) would not be opposed by either government; but hostile action by mobs was quite possible. The staffs were set to work to churn out op plans to cover all possibilities:

primarily, on the assumption that it would necessary to establish a beachhead area to protect the evacuation from hostile action. Beach studies and landing plans were begun. Coleman was given the beaches in the vicinity of Alex; my area was Haifa. I spent the morning studying the Top Secret op plans prepared by Sixth Fleet and ComTransPhibRon 6. We needed maps from the S-2.

The S-2 section was not entirely prepared for this request. Almost their only function aboard ship, aside from registering and issuing our Secret op plans, was maintaining files of maps. It now turned out that what they had was a large, cardboard box full of maps, rolled up. They didn't know what they had.

They did produce, for Coleman, a map board covered with acetate over a map of Alexandria, with Red, Green and Purple beaches marked on it with grease pencil. But Coleman checked the coordinates and found that two of the beaches were marked in the wrong location, by several miles. Could have hindered coordination, in the actual landing.

I asked for a map of Haifa, 1:10,000. After a while, the map clerk brought in a map of Jaffa. I sent him back. He brought back a map of Haifa, 1:25,000. I told him I had to have 1:10,000 (I had an op overlay to fit that scale). He looked pained. "Don't you know the AMS number, sir?" "No." "Well, without the AMS number it's just about impossible sir....it would mean looking through every map we have."

I put off till later running through the fantasy of explaining to the surviving platoon leaders that the reason we had not included a map overlay in our op order was that it would have required the S-2 clerk to look through every one of his maps. I said pleasantly, "Well, that's what you will have to do." Ten minutes later he came in and produced it with a flourish.

The S-2, who usually managed to rise above the inefficiencies of his section, like Ike, by making clear that he had no idea what was going on in the office (this was true) made the mistake of stating positively to the Colonel that they had no ~~map~~ small maps of Alexandria. He didn't know, of course, and was temporarily embarrassed when his section sergeant turned up 40 copies.

But the S-3 office functioned well enough; we'd had plenty of practice. For once I didn't mind the drudgery. At noon a combat task force with two carriers caught up and passed us, speeding east. French destroyers crossed our path, heading west (?). By mid-afternoon we knew that our first destination would be Alexandria; but I kept up on the Haifa plans, since we would probably head there next. At 1600 a message was circulated from the new Commodore of TransPhibRon 6; it ended: "Anyone who doesn't think this is more exciting than Barcelona is nuts!" " " " said Sgt. Dailey. The Commodore is very salty in his messages; though not, of course, so salty as Sgt. Dailey.

Without urging, the platoon leaders actually managed to find space for exercises at last (they were stiff next morning). Toward evening the word came over the loudspeaker: "Smoking lamp is out in the vicinity of No. 3 hatch, while ammo is being unloaded." Coleman and I looked up from our desks and smiled happily at each other.

Test-firing of all weapons was scheduled on the fantail. (We had pushed test-firing for months, but hadn't gotten anyone interested enough. We also wanted live firing exercises ashore, but not even blanks were authorized: for the frank reason that it was felt undesirable for Americans to appear too aggressive to foreign civilians).

We finished the plans. As darkness fell, the firing began on the fantail, six Marines at a time firing their rifles, BAR's and machine-guns. (Down in the TOQ the H&S gunny was having a conference with Payne, his CO. He discussed the test-firing with the enthusiasm typical of an H&S NCO: "If this ain't the most fucked-up outfit I ever seen!" (standard opening formula). "Test-firing M-1's! Automatic weapons, all right....but M-1's, for Christ sake!"). The firing went on till late at night. The Navy OD burst into the wardroom. "How far will those bullets carry?" he wanted to know. (It was still twilight). The Burdo was two miles astern of us, and he claimed that some of the Marines were deliberately aiming at it.

Smith came in, jubilant; all his machine-guns had fired. But half the BAR's wouldn't fire automatic, as could have been expected. And, surprise, a third of the M-1's wouldn't fire semi-automatic. Now, the night before an invasion (and all the next morning) Marines were lined up outside the armory with broken extractors, ejectors, clogged gas ports. Toward midnight Burton (who had my old platoon) came into the wardroom for a cup of coffee. "How did it go?" He said, "Some of the weapons would fire." "Well, at least you won't have that nagging feeling that when you say, 'Fire,' nothing will happen."

We still didn't know what would happen the next morning. I thought I should get some sleep, but I sat upreading the teletype. The op plan for Alex was being run off. Coleman and I helped put it together (landing plans, concept of operations, plans for naval gunfire, tanks, artillery, shore party, communications, engineers, alternate plans, etc); we turned it over to the S-2 for distribution at 0200. We read on the tape of a blaze flaring along every mile of the south and east shores of the Med. (We were wanted all over at once. The conferences Sunday night had involved a possible airlift to Morocco, where there was a threat that may not have hit the papers). It was an exciting night.

31 Oct: Wednesday

We were anchored outside Alexandria harbor. The Egyptian government was cooperating; we would be allowed to use the harbor for evacuation. Our op plan wouldn't be needed, except possibly for the part calling ~~x~~ for a company to accompany the convoy from Cairo. Then word from Sixth Fleet: Egyptians didn't want any Marines ashore.

~~We~~ In the middle of the morning an Egyptian pilot came aboard and we headed for the harbor. A long breakwater closed off most of the entrance, leaving only a narrow gap. A tug towed us through the gap and brought us to a position in the midst of the harbor. For the first time, a port city stretch flat around us; in every one of the other Med ports we had visited, the city rose steeply ~~on~~ a ring of hills around the bay. At one end, on a point of land, a tall lighthouse, radio towers, and the large, administrative-looking buildings of Farouk's Alexandria palace; moored in front of it was his huge white yacht. The flat skyline of the city was broken by a line of thin minarets. The coastline curved around us, and the hangar of the airfield, about three miles away, looked very close. Even closer, bare dunes lining the coast symbolized the sand desert that the maps showed a few miles inland, lying between Alex and Cairo.

We spent the day waiting; for word ~~for~~ Golf Company to form a guard for the evacuee convoy, for word of the arrival of evacuees. Our op plan wasn't worth much after all, since half the battalion shipping had been separated from us to proceed to Gaza. I had to plan the use of the artillery and shore party troops as infantry to hold the evacuation beachhead; ~~sin~~ if G Co were used to guard the convoy (assuming that mob action made it necessary to use beach evacuation). Finally the word came: the first evacuees would arrive at 1700.

In the afternoon, Egyptian bumboats, with tall colored felucca sails, began to crowd along the sides of the ship. They sold fezzes, camel-saddle seats, purses, hassocks: the leather goods were identically the same kind as peddled a ~~complex~~ thousand miles west in Morocco, but of the cheapest, sleaziest quality. Ropes were attached to the tall masts of the feluccas; these would be caught by customers at the rail, who would haul up their purchases in baskets.

Again, more hours over a hot teletype. The night before I had been struck by a curious reluctance by Britain and France to condemn Israel. Now, word was coming through of an amazing ultimatum, addressed equally to invader and invaded, to cease hostilities "or else." It was up that night.

At 1700, word that the evacuees would not come aboard that night. A blackout would be enforced in Alexandria and the harbor. Surprisingly, we would remain in the harbor that night.

All day the ship had been preparing frantically for the arrival of the evacuees. The teletype said that every effort would be made to commandeer commercial shipping for the purpose, but we got set to squeeze them in. All officers had to vacate the Troop Officers Quarters, which would be used for women with babies. We moved all our gear in with Naval officers on the upper decks (ironically, the week that followed told no story of privation for the Marine officers. We had never suspected just how great the disparity in living conditions between the Navy and Marines actually was. Every one of the 20 officers who had to "squeeze in" with the Navy found himself living incomparably better than he had before--in fact, living like a human being. But as soon as the operation was over, the Navy efficiently displaced ~~back~~ us back to our black hole: to an Officers' Country of no chairs, no desks, nothing but racks--the life of a can of tomatoes in a supermarket. After discovering that the Navy regarded a space in which five Marine first Lieutenants were living for six months as inadequate, outside the TOQ, for one ensign (this is literally true), I found it damned hard ~~it~~ to go back to a room in which I could bend over to get at my locker box only if the other four occupants got in their racks or left the room. As a matter of fact, I personally made a fight about leaving Navy rooms that were half-empty when we were in them (e.g., four desks, four racks, four chairs, four closets--for two occupants, one Navy, one Marine) to be three-quarters empty for the rest of the cruise. But the Navy wasn't impressed.)

But the move was not so providential for the troops. They were all moved into one compartment, with hot bunks: i.e., sleeping in shifts. It was slightly grim. As they vacated compartments, working parties began cleaning them up. In the midst of our moving from the TOQ, all lights went out, something which happened for several hours nearly every day in the TOQ. But work went on ~~my~~ flashlight. Strange, exotic stores began appearing: Canvas curtains for the TOQ rooms (we had been requesting them in vain for months, to shut out the all-night lights burning in the narrow ~~back~~ passageway); new mattresses.

As evening chow started, the word was passed to darken ship. All ports were secured. Hatches were dogged down; only two remained open on the main deck, and double blackout curtains were hung between them and the red lights that alone remained on in the passageways. In the past, every darken ship exercise had resulted in acid communiques from the flag the next morning, but this one was for real. Outside, Alexandria was dark, except for the lighthouse; the ships were totally blacked out.

I sat in the room next to CIC, reading the long roll of teletype. I heard the word come in on the squawkbox from Flag Plot: "Large group of bogies on the scope, heading right for us." Within a minute the word was out over the speaker: "Red lights below. Damage control personnel, man GQ stations. Now set condition ALFA."

(cont)

*Read carefully and take notes; there will be a quiz
when I return.*

8.

((We were sitting in Alexandria Harbor; arrival of evacuees aboard delayed till the next day because of blackout. Still possibility of mob action, riots in Alex or Cairo, requiring G Co to land and protect evacs. England-France had issued ultimatum expiring that night; landings were expected the next morning. We had test-fired all weapons the night before, spent the day shifting the troops and officers to make room for the evacuees. Now go on with the story.))

2115, 31 October:

I was sitting in the room next to Combat Information Center, reading the rolls of teletype, when the word came into CIC that Cairo was undergoing heavy air attack. Within minutes the ensign watching the radarscope announced without looking up, "Many unidentified aircraft heading toward Alexandria, from Cairo." The word came down on the squawkbox from Flag Plot, the commodore's (Phibron 6) operations center on the deck above, a moment later: "Many bogies sighted, heading straight for us, 225 40 miles." A lieutenant flipped up the switch on the squawkbox and answered, "We got 'em."

The loudspeaker announced throughout the ship: "Red lights below. Damage control personnel man GQ stations." The XO appeared, gave the word to sound GA, then changed it to Condition ALFA (all hatches closed). CIC began to fill up. The Operations Officer took one of the scopes. The Exec and Navigator bent over the chart in the corner, plotting the position of the planes as an ensign called out the data from the scope.

I edged against the wall, in a spot where I might not be noticed and where I could see one of the scopes. The Captain and the Commodore's Chief of Staff came in. Flag Plot compared notes via the squawkbox (an intercom with a very high amplifier; a conversational tone several feet from the fixed mike comes out the other end as a shout). "We've tracked them to 225 25 miles but then they disappear into land return...many planes, at least 40, they're making as much noise on the scope as a carrier." "Same here...we've tracked them all the way from Cairo, then had a fade....came straight for Alexandria, but we lose them 25 miles out."

The sweep on the scope, a thin line of light revolving over the face, lit up, as it passed, countless light dots and blotches. Most of these were hills, or clouds or electronic phantoms. But some of them, when the sweep came round again, edged over slightly: leaving a faint shadow of light in their former position. These were planes. In areas where they sensed movement, the men over the scopes marked an X on the face of the scope with grease pencil over each of the blots lit by the sweep. The planes were the blips that slipped out from under their X's when the sweep passed again. Knobs on the set controlled the position of a small dot of light; when this was placed over a blip, its range from the ship (the center of the scope) appeared on a dial.

The first blips, which had vanished in the snow at the center of the scope, had reappeared; they had turned west, now they were over El Alamein. But the bombing of Cairo was still going on, and a new group of planes was leaving the capital and heading toward us: "Many bogies 225 75, closing." "Now all Marines, lay down to your compartments," said the loudspeaker. The Captain and Chief of Staff looked over the shoulder of the Exec as he plotted on the charts. The new group was one large blob on the scope. With each turn of the sweep it took a little jump, approaching the center. It was very bright; it took several turns of the sweep before a position faded, so that it left a track of footprints across the face. "Bogies 225 35, still closing.... bogies closing fast." "The British and French must know we're here," said the Chief of Staff to the Captain.

Twenty-five miles out the blotch veered sharply west. Like the others it passed over El Alamein, which seemed to be a rendezvous point, then headed east into the Med. More flights followed the same pattern. The Captain spoke into the squawkbox: "The planes seem to be making a deliberate effort to avoid Alexandria. Don't think we'll see much. Suggest we modify Condition Able." The Commodore's voice came back: "Yes. If they come back we'll go through the performance again."

CIC had gotten too crowded. I went out into the passageway and went up the ladder to Flag Plot. As I got to the top the hatch to the outside opened as a sailor came in (the passageway was dark, lit only by one red bulb) and I slipped out. The harbor was perfectly blacked out. The harbor lights and the huge lighthouse beam were all dark. There was a glow on the horizon in the direction of Cairo, and by shifting my head I could make out a little of the outlines of the Thuban and the Fort Snelling silhouetted against it. Only the water was bright, each wave leaving a trail of phosphorescence. There was so much phosphorescence it seemed the ships must stand out from the air as dark patches on the water. As I watched, a few lights began to go on in the town.

As I came into Flag Plot, someone was saying to the Commodore that Alexandria was lifting its blackout. "Let's us be coy," he said.

The tension had lifted for a while. The men on the scopes continued busy with their grease pencils, but a group around the Commodore sat back to discuss the situation. "If they had come into the harbor," the Commodore was saying, "I would have sat quiet as a house...they would have hit anything moving." Anyway, he pointed out, we couldn't get out of the harbor now; the Egyptians had shut off the mouth with their anti-submarine net. How about putting a spotlight on the huge American flag we had flying throughout the night? "The Egyptians say no...and they could shoot our lights out."

For a while, nothing happened. We stayed blacked out. Then the word came up from CIC, "Port Said is getting a hell of a pasting." A little later new raid showed up over Cairo; and again they turned toward us. The ship was back at Condition ALFA. When the raid was 25 miles from us I went out in the passageway, waited till a sailor from the bridge came in through the hatch and went outside. Again the port was black. I waited for the planes, but they never got close enough to hear; again they turned away. This time the lights in the city stayed out. After a while I went down to the wardroom, had some coffee and talked over the situation. Most people thought that the British wouldn't bomb Alexandria while we were there. I bet Russ Janson & back that they would. Finally I went to bed: in my temporary, luxurious room that Russ and shared, for the evacuation, with the Supply Officer and the Dentist.

1 November:

As I came up to the wardroom for breakfast, everyone was out on deck, portside. Planes were bombing Alexandria airport. It was three miles away, in plain view on the edge of the shoreline that curved around us. The big hangar was on fire. The planes were clearly visible. They were dive-bombing; we could predict the explosions quite closely, a few seconds after the plane pulled up from its dive. It was almost over when I arrived. The planes came away and passed seaward of the harbor; the harbor guns opened up on them futilely. We went into breakfast and I collected a dollar from Janson. Afterwards we looked at the teletype. All the bulletins said Alexandria had been among the cities bombed during the night. (Possibly it had been, but no one on the ship was aware of it).

About 0900 a naval battle appeared to be in progress. Two ships on the horizon were firing, apparently at each other, since the flashes were followed, after an interval, by geysers in the water. After a while, the Gunnery Officer commented: "They're firing at planes...they've forgotten to set the fuses, the shells are going off when they fall in the water." For another ten minutes, we watched the explosions in the water. "They must be really shook; that's like trying to hit a plane with a rifle." Finally the geysers stopped and black puffs began appearing high above the ships. Apparently the planes went away, and the destroyers began coming in closer.

They

I went up to the Flag Bridge. When the destroyers were half-way to the harbor, planes appeared flying directly over us. The XO picked up his megaphone and shouted down over the rail, "Those planes are Egyptian." "I think they're Egyptian," he muttered, straightening. A few minutes later the shore batteries opened up. The bursts were far below the planes, which were heading for the destroyers. The nearest destroyer picked up speed suddenly and began to zig-zag to the right. The lead plane peeled off, dropped on it in a sharp dive, then pulled up. A bomb burst in the water about 100 yards from the ship.

The Egyptians on shore continued to fire at the planes with 50's and 5" although they were now far out of range. The planes, four of them, were now diving on the one destroyer from several directions; it was twisting and running fast. The other had turned and was steaming left, toward the entrance to the harbor. The bombs seemed to be closer each time. A pair of heavy geysers hid the destroyer entirely. Smoke began to appear, and when the water had fallen the ship was buried in a hill of smoke. We had caught the rhythm of the bombing by now, the dive, the pullout and the flash, so by looking at the right spot at the right moment we could see the bomb leave the plane and follow it to the target.

Two Egyptian corvettes that had come into the harbor earlier that morning fired occasionally at the planes; sailors at their rails watched the action casually. We wondered what they were thinking. Each bomb now hid the ship in its explosion; the smoke reached very high. It seemed the destroyer must be sinking, with so many direct hits. The planes flew away, probably out of ammo. The destroyer began to move left, toward the harbor. The other had come in and anchored a few hundred yards in front of us.

It took a long time for the ship to arrive; as it came, the smoke dissipated. The Egyptians were supposed to have four destroyers by an easy calculation, it appeared that they had just lost 25% of their destroyer force. But when the ship got close, it looked scarcely damaged. Apparently it had put up a smoke screen; the geysers that had hid the ship and seemed to bury it must have been near misses. (The next day, when we got a look at its starboard side, there was a dent and a large burned area, apparently from a close miss). It was a very clean, modern Russian ship, light green. It came very close on our starboard side, very close. It looked as though it might report alongside. Someone called out from the navigation bridge below, "Cox'n, make the port accommodation ladder," the familiar cry of the OD (the starboard ladder is reserved for officers). It dropped less than a hundred yards astern of us. The ship's officers watched, unbelieving. The huge harbor looked almost empty; in the middle of it the Egyptian destroyer had snuggled up next to us, hiding its tiny green Egyptian ensign in the shadow of our huge holiday flag was stretched horizontally over the canvas roof of the ship so that the bombers would make no mistake). After staring in amazement as the destroyer heaved anchor, the XO disappeared into Flag Plot and emerged with his camera. "I've got to get a picture of this," he said. "No one would ever believe how close that bastard is to us." The destroyer was well armed with 40mm; it was obvious that if any raids came from the northeast, the Egyptians would be firing through our rigging.

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Meanwhile, Mike boats had been circling near the ship, waiting for the word to go ashore. Out of sight, they carried loaded revolvers, but the crew, by orders, showed no visible arms. Only a couple of Marines were to go ashore, to run the Evacuation Center. Finally they made their first runs to the dock. With the boats in the water, the Number 3 hatch was uncovered, ready to receive luggage. The mess cooks set up tables on either side of the hatch, with coffee and cake; there was a sign over one of the tables, "We knew you were coming (sic) so we baked a cake."

By order of the XO, all persons topside were wearing helmets, as protection against falling flak. While the boats were in at the beach, the word came over the squawkbox on the Flag Bridge, "Large group of bogies, 005 35, closing." Every few minutes the voice announced the heading and range. Finally someone spotted them, very small in the distance, coming at us from the east over the minarets of Alexandria. They were coming directly over us. Theshore batteries opened up first (one was firing all day a few yards from the Evacuation Center). An explosion to our stern shook us all; the destroyer had opened with its 5" ~~in~~ gun. A little Egyptian flak ship, bristling with 40mm, sent up a cloud of tracers as the planes came in low over the harbor. Guns were hammering now ~~all~~ around us, ~~fx~~ chains of purple tracers rose toward the planes, which came ahead through the black ~~px~~ puffs of smoke and shrapnel from the 5" guns. The firing was the most accurate of the day, the planes the closest to the flak; they were heading for the airfield west of the harbor. Gradually the fire from the harbor diminished as the planes left ~~thx~~ it behind. As we watched they started their low-level attacks on the field. The hanger, badly hit in the morning raid, was set burning again. The planes came at it very low. Then they turned out to sea and headed east close to the horizon. As they passed our beam the Egyptian guns in the harbor let off a few rounds, token firing that burst miles short of the targets.

During the last of the firing, the first Mikeboat loaded with evacuees drew alongside. The people in it were all well dressed. With the help of sailors, they stepped from the pitching sternsheets of the boat ~~tx~~ to the accomodation ladder; sailors carried babies up the ladder. Their luggage came aboard in cargo nets and was stowed on the Number 3 hatch. While they drank coffee and ate cake, the Operations Officer welcomed them to the ship. Then they were checked off (they had been screened at the Center ashore; at first only American citizens were allowed; later some British and French and other nationalities were accepted; the screening was run by representatives of the Consulate) and sent to their compartments. Women with babies stayed in the TOQ; men and boys were put ~~affain~~ in the old G Co compartment, women in the forward compartment.

As they were finishing their coffee, a pattern started that was to continue with nearly every load: a raid was announced. Just as each group of evacuees was being introduced to the ship, there would be an ~~ann~~ announcement over the loudspeaker: "There are unidentified aircraft in the vicinity. Evacuees and all personnel not needed topside lay below; all personnel topside wear helmets," and the passengers would be hurried down the ladders. The raids went on all day. Finally everyone got blase and watched them from the covered passageways on the main deck and the 61 level; the men wore helmets but the passengers didn't bother.

By afternoon we were taking on evacuees on the port and starboard ladders simultaneously. Nearly all of them seemed well to do, although their idea of correct attire for a ship of war corresponded to the typical costume of choice for visiting the Capitol: almost half the women were in shorts and pedal-pushers. One man's choice of evacuation garb involved sunglasses, ski pants and slipper sox. Noone complained about the tight pedalpushers and short shorts, of course. The scene on the Flag Bridge was straight from "Mr. Roberts"; everyone had gotten hold of a pair of binoculars, and they were all pointed in the same direction: down. Some of the women showed to their very best advantage from directly overhead (a sad thought; how often can anyone appreciate them?). One girl, in a pink T-shirt, presented so spectacular a horizontal profile that I ~~strolled~~ strolled below to the main deck to view her at close range. As I approached the ladder a sailor who had been standing next to me on the Bridge, having beat me down the three ladders by descending the port side, was already turning away. "No good, lieutenant," he said. "Not worth it." It was true. From any normal angle, she didn't stand up.

But others did. The transport was filling up with beautiful American girls. We stood on the Ol level and gaped at them. We hadn't seen any for three months, and we stood and watched them, in candy-striped pedalpushers and cotton blouses, or cashmere cardigans. Most beautiful among them were a group of waterballet swimmers from California and Texas, who were being sent around the world by the State Department; they were being evacuated after their first show in Cairo.

There wasn't any chance to fraternize. The main deck was packed was evacuees and luggage. Marines were carrying the luggage below; the prettier girls led a whole caravan behind them, each man holding a single article. Among other things, luggage-carrying was the pass to the out-of-bounds women's compartments; when the officers realized this, some of them considered lending a hand. Under the circumstances they decided, that would be too transparent, so it ended up that the enlisted men got most of the contacts with the women, who soon got used to having Marines in their compartments at all hours, carrying luggage and babies, shifting equipment and performing odd jobs. Each group of arrivals was hurried below as soon as they had had time to drink a cup of coffee.

As a matter of fact, the Marines were having a ball. Since the sailors had their own jobs to attend to, the job of caring for the passengers fell mainly on Marines, and they were falling over each other to feed babies, heave trunks, fix up compartments. They didn't concentrate their attention on the girls at all; the women and children all found themselves with a fire team of servants. There were dangerous tendencies in it, of course; very risky business to expose troops to civilians, who treat them like humans. Exhilarating for the troopers, who in the next few days became familiar ~~it~~ with the bridges, superstructure and all the first class accommodations from which Navy tradition barred them, but disastrous ~~ex~~ for military courtesy and discipline. All in all, it was a holiday from the Marine Corps for them, which was all right, though it became clear that the decontaminating process afterwards would probably require locking them in their compartments and loosing live steam on them.

Half the evacuees we took aboard that day had arrived in Alex the night before from Cairo. Just as they had reached their hotel, the blackout had started and they had gone to bed in total darkness. The other half had stopped the night in the desert, halfway along the 140-mile track from Cairo. Later it came over the teletype that a raid planned for an airfield along their route had been cancelled when the British learned that the evacuees would be passing right by it.

At sunset came the biggest raid of all. High to seaward a flight of bogies flew from the east. The flak ships and destroyers opened on them; even when we were prepared, the 5" battery 60 yards away jarred us. The bursts were far below the planes, which seemed to move slowly, very high up. All at once the hanger on the airfield exploded. While all the guns were poking at the high decoys, a flight of jets had swung in over the airfield from the land. It was hard to watch them because the field was on line with the setting sun, but they were coming in lower than before. The Egyptians were taken completely by surprise. The lines of tracers dropped toward the west, then died out; the destroyers, having elected to station themselves close to our American flags ("Do you want to move them away?" I asked the XO. "Have you got an Egyptian flag to run up?") were unable to give any protection to the airfield.

The hanger was finished this time, that was clear. There was hardly anything left of it to burn. The planes had hit some oil tanks, leaving a tower of black smoke and flame. Now planes were making final strafing runs, coming from different directions, across the land, across the water, so low they seemed about to hit the waves. One came down, low, lower, till everyone watching on the bridge was holding his breath; he seemed certain to crash, he passed below the level of the hanger, then he pulled out across the water, leaving behind a hill of flame from a napalm tank. Then the planes flew out to the horizon, where they became very small, and flew along it to the east. As they passed the harbor the guns around us fired a final salute through our rigging; they always did this, as though they had picked their present sanctuary because it was a good spot from which to ambush the returning flights. Except for the one raid that morning, they never came close to hitting any of the planes. (Either their radar or their fire direction was not good, because even when planes were visible, approaching, the guns of the destroyers would point in the wrong direction. Often they actually fired salvos in areas that were quite free of planes. They could have done better simply by looking over at the people on our Flag Bridge, who, thanks to the information coming from CIC, would all be looking in the right direction fifteen minutes before the planes appeared). For as long as it took the ~~sun~~ light to fade, there were five thick strands of smoke rising from the airfield. (Later I saw that picture, apparently taken from the Chilton, in an ~~American~~ magazine Italian magazine).

It was time to darken ship again. Red lights went on in the passageways, blackout curtains were hung in the hatches on the main deck and other hatches were secured, portholes were secured. Smoking lamp was out on all weather decks. Inside, evacuees were sitting on the deck, crowding the passageways. Women with babies were eating first, then continuous serving till 2100. An English woman on the O1 level asked me where the mess hall was. I took her down to the ~~main~~ main deck, where an enormous line curled toward the ladder down to the mess deck. "Ah, is that the queue?" she said contentedly, and went to join the end of it.

Looking back on it, we got to know the evacuees very little. There were too many of them, they were packed in too tight; wherever they were, on the main deck, outside the wardroom, in the mess hall, there were so many of them it didn't seem natural to insert yourself in the mass and start making casual conversation.

The raids were over Cairo all that night. Many of the women had husbands left in the city; there were a number of wives of TWA pilots, whose husbands were spending the night near the Cairo airfields, the targets of the bombs. In Flag Plot messages of the raids came in from "Big Brother," the call sign of the Consulate in Alex. Radio Central and CIC had been plastered with signs barring all unnecessary personnel, so that their teletypes were closed to me; I followed the tape now in Flag Plot.

It was the constant flow of Word, constantly shifting, swirling, always ominous, cosmic, that gave this week its peculiar exciting quality, its tension. I had never watched the news come in over the ticker before; and if I had, I never would have seen such a flood of events, of hints and rumors and denials to be passed down to the wardroom and speculated on. Each message that came to the ship changed plans, affected our employment. We would land, we couldn't land; we were bound for Haifa, Beirut, Cyprus, Morocco; evacuees would be flown from Cairo, Cairo International Airport was closed to all civilian traffic. Meanwhile, incomprehensible things were happening. "An authoritative London source" said England was prepared to attack Israel if this were more than a raid; then England and France made statements neglecting to finger Israel as the initiator of the conflict; then the amazing ultimatum, ordering Egypt to refrain from defending her borders; then the attack by Britain, Britain! bombing on the side of invading Israel. The thought of London using bombs on a weaker nation with which it was not at war seemed as likely as John L. Lewis resorting to an injunction.

And the situation developing in Hungary: hour by hour the rebellion growing, the Russians retreating, the Air Force gone over to the rebels, the tanks ~~re~~ backing out of Budapest, the reports that Soviet tanks still ringed the city. The unclear fighting in Sinai: Israel claiming to have won objectives, Egyptians retorting that no contact had been made; Israeli reports that the Egyptian army was running, surrendering, Egyptian claims that Egyptian jets were destroying the Jews; Egyptians announce one of her corvettes scuttled, Israel says they boarded it and sailed it into Haifa. And have the British landed yet at Port Said? No one knew; the Russians said they had, the British wouldn't talk, the French said no. In the background, deaths on Cyprus, uproar in North Africa over the French capture of the Algerian leaders, riots in Meknes and Fez, explosions in refineries and pipelines across the Middle East; then, as the ~~Russians~~ British and French drop on Port Said, the Russians turn their tanks back into Budapest and begin to kill the revolution.

It wasn't a little war any more. I had looked forward, ~~to~~ longed for a police action; but in this mess where was the side for an honest cop?

The British planes were using napalm. I didn't like to think about that. The thought of napalm hadn't bothered me before, in connection with the situations in which I had imagined our fighting. In this particular situation, it didn't sit right.

Outside the blackout was perfect. There was a moon, and from the port side the Egyptian destroyer next to us was silhouetted. The passageways along the weather decks were a mass of couples; they were packed too close to allow much intimacy, but the men were exploiting Darken Ship to the fullest. Under the boats on the main deck, several guitars and harmonicas were playing; there was the sound of girls' voices. APA 38 had become, unreluctantly, an excursion cruiser.

2 Nov.

Awoke to the guns firing outside. I pulled on a pair of pants and went out in my bare feet. It was just turning light, and the tracers were beautiful in the twilight. The planes were already returning east, across the city; something had been left to burn at the airfield after all, there were flames among the smoke. I didn't feel like going back to bed, so I ate breakfast among the watchstanders, earliest I had been up on the ship.

Boats were in the water early and the new evacuees began coming aboard. There were more and more foreigners among them. They came from the Embassy, Point Four, TWA, businesses, tours. Children were all over the ship, wearing cartridge belts, packs and helmets. Marines had been lending their gear to them generously, and they borrowed what was not lent; quite possibly some of the lenders had been urged by the thought that wholesale surveys would be forthcoming after the operation. One sergeant had formed a platoon of Junior Marines and was drilling them next to the Number 1 hatch. In the wake of the kids, I visited sanctums where Marine officers had never been welcomed before.

The Forward Recreation Room had been turned into a nursery, for the babies whose mothers were busy with other children. I happened in at lunchtime, although visitors were not permitted; at the sight of the babies in their cardboard cribs I was overwhelmed with paternal instinct. The nurses among the evacuees had all been impressed into duty in the nursery or the sickbay, but they were still short. I put on a hospital gown and informed them that I would help them feed the babies. I stayed for a couple of hours. I had a terrific time, one of the best on the cruise; I took on their problem babies, fed them, walked them, sang to them (what I like especially about babies is that they don't mind my singing to them), burped and changed them. My skill at putting them to sleep awoke the admiration of the nurses. The mothers who came in to nurse their babies probably assumed I was a doctor, and my presence didn't seem to bother them. I came back that afternoon, and the evening; it made it easy to imagine that I was back home with Robert.

In the forward compartment, middle-aged men tried to sleep in the heat on the upper racks, above the herds of little boys that raced along the aisles and swung from rack to rack. Most of the passengers had probably ~~not~~ never imagined travelling third-class; they couldn't have dreamed the existence of a class this low. It was unnerving to see civilians living under such conditions. But they did almost no complaining (not that they should have; but it wouldn't have been surprising). The only incident occurred when the manager of the Hilton hotel made a scene at finding the mess line secured when he turned up for chow at 2130 ("Damn it, in my hotel..."--he may not have said that but he was apparently thinking it).

The arrivals slowed to a trickle; finally the boats were swung aboard. We were leaving the harbor before dark. The Egyptians had not been anxious to lose our protection, but the Commodore had insisted. There was one thing I happened to know, having seen the message in Flag Plot (it's come out in the papers now); the Egyptians claimed the channel outside the harbor had been mined by French subs. At first they refused the services of a minesweeper; finally they lent one and it preceded us out of the harbor. The Commodore must have been sweating it out.

The radarscope showed bogies in the east as we weighed anchor. As we passed the breakwater, the anti-sub net and obstacles having been pulled aside, all the Egyptians waved and called to us. We passed the skeleton of the bombed hanger; already behind us tracers were rising all over ~~the city~~ Alexandria toward the hovering planes that now came in to bomb the city.